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SUBJECT: FRANCE'S NEW RESEARCH MINISTER TO REFORM UNIVERSITIES

REF: A) 06 PARIS 7882; B) 05 PARIS 6874

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//NOT FOR INTERNET DISSEMINATION//

¶1. Summary: On May 18, parliamentarian and spokesperson for France's center right UMP party, Valerie Pecresse, was appointed as a full minister for Higher Education and Research in the new Sarkozy government. (In the previous government a 'junior' minister held the same portfolio.) Pecresse will need that status for the tasks ahead are arduous: deepening the reforms of France's scientific/innovation system begun in recent years (see ref A), while initiating a major change in direction for France's traditional, governmental university system. The goal is to make universities the center of gravity for research and to shed them of their slow-to-change governmental nature. End Summary.

University reform tops the list

¶2. According to recent reports, Pecresse's top priority as new Minister for Higher Education and Research will be to develop an "autonomous status" for universities to help them "adapt to a more competitive world economy." Ultimately, French universities are to find their place "at the core of the research effort." Existing public research establishments would continue to perform independent research but would further transition into "funding councils," tasked with the role of supporting the best university research teams. These measures are decidedly controversial in France's traditional research system which only recently began competing for government research funding. During the presidential campaign, candidate Sarkozy pledged that funding would increase 50% for higher education and 25% for research by 2012. While favoring university reform under certain conditions, student organizations have already cautioned against a too hasty attempt to change the system.

A jurist at the helm

¶3. Although Valerie Pecresse, 39, does not possess scientific credentials, she attended HEC ('Hautes Etudes Commerciales') and ENA (the prestigious 'Ecole Nationale d'Administration'), before joining the Council of State in 1992 as an auditor-jurist. In her several years there, she rose through the ranks to become 'master of inquests'. From 1995-98, she served as secretary general of Agence France Presse's oversight committee and, concurrently, as jurist on the Council of State's Contentious Issues Board. She joined the staff of former President Chirac's Elysee Palace office in 1998 responsible for "emerging issues." In 2000, she became Counselor for Technology and Information. (Pecresse reportedly taught President Chirac how to use the Internet.) During Chirac's 2002 reelection campaign, Pecresse is credited with having a considerable talent for public communications. She was elected as National Assembly Deputy in June 2002 and served in the Assembly's Law Commission. Since 2004, she assumed the role of UMP spokesperson.

¶4. Additionally, during her period at the Council of State, Pecresse specialized in telecommunications, environmental, and social affairs issues. In the National Assembly, she developed interests in areas such as information technologies, biotechnology, genetics, and bioethics, as well as children's and family issues.

A full-fledged ministry, but...

¶5. Despite a reduction in the number of ministers and ministries in the new government, the higher education and research portfolio has evolved from 'junior ministerial' status in the former government to a fully independent ministry; Pecresse will report directly to Prime Minister Fillon. The ministry is ranked ninth out of the 15 ministries. Notwithstanding the manifold efforts of the previous

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government to reform France's scientific/innovation system, she inherits a ministry subject to multiple and redundant structures, uncertain funding, and insufficient strategic direction and coordination. (Note: Pecresse will be the seventh minister in charge of research since 2000.) On the higher education side of her portfolio, long overdue university reform has been repeatedly postponed due to political pressure.

Ongoing scientific system reform

¶6. Moreover, France's new scientific/innovation system is considered a 'work in progress.' It was only in April 2006 that the country adopted the important research and innovation bill (RIB, ref A), providing for the creation of semi-independent structures: a National Research Agency with its competitive grant system; competitiveness clusters; Research and Higher Education Hubs; and Advanced Research Thematic Foundations. Most recently, the government formed an Evaluation Agency (AERES) for scientific research. Evaluation of the work of public researchers has been a particularly sensitive subject - where traditionally little difference is made in public establishments between quality of research as regards promotion and funding. Moreover, the newly-set up AERES system has yet to be put to the test. The RIB also aims to reinforce science-industry relationships and encourage private R&D funding, recurrent weaknesses in the French research system.

¶7. At university level, with 88 university poles and 80 percent of public research theoretically 'hosted' by universities via joint research labs, the university sector, traditionally the poor relation to public research in France, keeps voicing its discontent over the loss of university standing, lack of equipment, and organizational cumbersomeness. (According to the most recent Shanghai ranking of universities worldwide, the highest-ranked French university came in at 46th place.)

Changes in university governance sought...

18. In order to reboot university research, the new GOF has decided to reinforce the role and autonomy of universities. A new status will grant (candidate) universities freedom to modify the structure of the university boards (change of governance); undertake their own staff recruitment; set their own agendas, syllabuses, and research programs; fix salaries; and manage their own budgets via foundations, private donors or companies. Also reportedly in the pipeline is an increase of student registration fees (possible "adjustment" according to family income) and a form of "selection" of students at entrance, or at least the introduction of student orientation according to job opportunities and not necessarily according to students' wishes. Other possible measures include a new grant allocation system based not only on revenues but also according to student merit, as well as measures to improve students' living and working conditions. According to the GOF agenda, the reform will be voted on during the summer and "experimented with" as early as this fall.

19. The Sarkozy program will also include reinforcing the role of universities in research and, ultimately, the transformation of public research establishments into agencies responsible for the funding of projects according to national priorities. This would be nothing short of revolutionary in the French scientific system and prove undoubtedly highly controversial to implement.

Top research goals

10. Priorities for research are fourfold:
-- Reinforce a culture of scientific evaluation by promoting competitive grants; program funding (as opposed to institutional funding) should become the rule;
-- Implementation of independent evaluation procedures;

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-- Preventing brain drain and attracting international talent, through, inter alia, improving work conditions for young researchers.
-- Increasing the percentage of industrial research in overall research. (Currently little more than half of France's research funding is devoted to industrial research. The target will be to increase this amount to two-thirds of total research at the 2012 horizon).

Priority fields for research discussed in the presidential campaign included: life sciences, nanotechnology, and environmental and energy technologies.

Comment: Neither easy nor fast...

12. New Higher Education and Research Minister Pécresse faces one of the most sensitive tasks in the new government of reforming highly politicized French universities. The new government's desire to push forward in this area has already triggered negative reactions among French student organizations. University presidents have also requested in-depth consultations before reform processes are initiated. It will also be interesting to watch whether Pécresse succeeds in the task of shifting resources away from research agencies to the university sector. End Comment.

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